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Counter Images: GDR-Underground Films 1983-1989 The Nonconformist Super-8 Scene

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COUNTER IMAGES: GDR-UNDERGROUND FILMS 1983-1989. THE NONCONFORMIST SUPER-8 SCENE. DVD. NTSC WITH SPECIAL FEATURES. DEFA FILM LIBRARY, 2008.

Counter Images is a collection of GDR underground short films by 10 different filmmakers, artists and musicians. Nine of the shorts had been previously released in the 1999 VHS edition *Gegenbilder (GDR Underground films)* with director Lutz Dammbeck's "Hommage á La Sarraz" now replaced with Helge Leiberg's "action situation." The DVD includes a bonus feature documentary by the director of one of the included short films, Cornelia Klauß, entitled "The Subversive Camera." Other bonus features include artist biographies and brief looks at the DEFA film library and the ex.orientelux archive for GDR underground film.

In *What Remains East German Culture and the Postwar Republic*, Marc Silberman shows the GDR was not as homogeneous as the socialist state would suggest. He stresses the importance of looking at the "complexities of experience behind the so-called iron curtain" (11). This avant-garde collection of short films provides a glimpse into such an area of complexity. In the accompanying documentary, the directors show moments in their films influenced by living in the GDR, although it may come to the audience's surprise that many of the short films were never meant to have a political message. As Cornelia Schleime notes, "meine Bilder waren nicht politisch / my images were not political." This supports Silberman's notion GDR society was more complex than the image created by the state.

The 1980s witnessed a new turn in short films influenced by punk and the new wave movements in both the GDR and FRG. These filmmakers were largely without formal training and built on the tradition of the avant-garde expressionist and Dadaist movements. Both GDR and FRG 1980s shorts rely on a flood of images, which depict a deconstructive nature. While scholars have researched FRG filmmakers beginning in the 1980s and into the 1990s, as Nora Alter points out (*Projecting History* 2-4), GDR and DDR documentaries and short film collections are only now gaining the attention of scholars because of DVD collections such as these.

The content of the ten short films in this collection varies by filmmaker. Each director stresses the importance of the image to provoke a reaction from the audience. Tohm di Roes's 1983 short "7x7 Facts about the Present Life of the Poet Tohm di Roes" uses sexually violent images and sexually suggestive objects to shock the audience. At the end of the short, the artist urinates on a sausage,

which he then eats. The disgusting display runs counter to anything which would have been shown in a GDR theater and marks a point of resistance among youth culture. The other films in the collection show images ranging from Berlin, train stations, homes, to artists performing. There is no one recurrent message or particular image among the films, but they are connected by their emphasis on image over sound and the destructive nature these images evoke on their audience. When first shown in the GDR, the films were projected in secret screenings outside of the theater to individuals sympathetic to this movement. Therefore, the reception was quite limited and did not have the support of the state. As the “The Subversive Camera” suggests, the Stasi was largely afraid of these directors’ projects because they did not understand them. The documentary focuses on both the political situation and the director’s limited technological constraints.

This DVD collection could be used in the classroom to discuss the cinematic techniques of the films or the amateur films made counter to Babelsberg’s standards. Teachers should be aware of the shocking quality of the images, which may alienate Hollywood-accustomed audiences. The documentary can also be used in classes looking at the historical context in which the films were made. As the documentary suggests, due to the controversy over the possible misreadings of the films, it would be valuable even to modern scholars and students today to have had the filmmakers included in the collection explain their projects without having to discuss the failed political system of the GDR. In researching GDR cinema, the question remains if scholars will always have to work with these films as GDR films or if they can be read outside of the political system in which they were made.

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